

ARSON

Episode 1: The Firesetter

On the heels of 9/11, and the deadly sniper shootings, a firesetter in the DC region is terrorizing neighborhoods in the middle of the night. A chance encounter leads to the realization that this is the work of a serial arsonist.

<<Tom Daley Drive Along>>

Kara: This is where Lou Edna Jones' house was.

Oh, it's an empty lot now.

Tom Daley: Yeah, they knocked it down, I guess.

Kara: Wow.

Tom Daley: Yeah. Big lot, isn't it?

Kara: It's huge. It's a big, corner lot.

Kara: Tom Daley is a retired arson investigator with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

Tom Daley: So, in December of 2003, after we asked the area departments and what-not to go through their files, Frankie Molino from D.C. homicide called me up and said, "Tom, we need to look at something." And we drove over here and Frankie, and Tony Exline went up on the porch and cut the indoor/outdoor carpeting off the porch. And then we took it to the lab. And at 15 times magnification, we could see that there was a

plastic remains of a jug and black plastic. And so, then that fire here was linked to the serial arson case.

Kara: Tom is driving me around parts of Virginia, DC and Maryland to point out locations that the DC serial arsonist set on fire over 15 years ago. Tom's not using Waze, or a map. He doesn't even have addresses written on paper. This is all from memory. From hours spent at each of these locations, during almost a two year investigation to capture what some call the most prolific serial arsonist in U.S.history.

This is the first Season of "Arson", I'm Kara McGuirk-Allison. In this podcast, we introduce you to the talented team of arson investigators who dedicated 22 months of their lives to capturing a horrific villain. Brought to you by the International Association of Arson Investigators, in cooperation with ATF, we've gained access to people and details about the case not shared before now. It's a story of dedication, of frustration and victories that culminates into an eventual win for law enforcement and the community. But not after much destruction and tragedy.

Lou Edna Jones was known as Mamma Lou in her neighborhood. An 86 year old grandmother on Evert St., she was a pillar in her community. She died in June 2003 as a result of the person lighting these fires.

<<ride along>>

Tom Daley: She was up in the back bedroom and he had set the front door on fire. And then fire went up the stairwell I think...

Kara: and Tom says that's what likely killed her.

<<Begin news montage>>

Kara: At this point, summer of 2003, officials didn't know what they were dealing with. Or that the number of fires would grow into the hundreds.

I first met Tom at his home just outside DC in an adorable neighborhood of midcentury houses. He's now retired from the ATF. We taped our interview downstairs where I gave him a small gift. A hat that said CREW from the Naval Academy, he currently coaches rowing at Gonzaga, a private Jesuit boys school in DC.

Tom Daley: You know In 2000, I had been with ATF, I've been law enforcement about 16 years and had been with ATF about 12, 13. And in 2001, we had the terrorist attacks at the Pentagon and World Trade Center. And I was a member of the Northeast National Response Team for ATF and was deployed to the Pentagon for probably better part of a month or more, And then 2002 in September, we was part of the initial response with ATF to Montgomery County for the serial sniper case with John Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo.

And then no sooner was that over with. In June 2003, we began a 22 month journey with the DC serial arson case, It was sort of three plus years of high drama.

Kara: The kind of drama that put the entire DC area on edge. It was one terrifying event after another that started with 9-11...

<<Montage of news clips:>>

<<NPR>>

<<Kara>> followed by mailed anthrax that poisoned 17 people and killed 5...

<<CBS>>

<<Kara>> and then in 2002 the Beltway snipers killed ten people and injured 3, in completely random and senseless attacks.

<<ABC News sniper clips "it happened again and again and again">>

Kara: And right on the heels of the snipers, a serial arsonist began lighting fires to doors and porches outside of homes while the people who lived there slept.

<<news clip Will Thomas>>

"My sources telling me that this was the work of a serial arsonist based on the time about 3 o'clock in the morning".....

Kara: To appreciate just how hard it was to find a suspect, you have to understand something about the geography. DC, Maryland, and Virginia are collectively known as the "DMV." The boundaries between the two states and the district tend to blend together especially for commuters. The metro rail system stretches far into both states. While the Potomac river separates Virginia from MD....the line between the Anacostia neighborhood in SE DC blends into the border of Prince George's County, divided by Southern Avenue.

It's on the East side of this street that Captain Scott Hoglander began to take notice of a pattern of fires in 2003.

Scott Hoglander: We were running probably two fires a day on average and we were very short staffed. Two people on a 24 hour shift schedule. We had four shifts. Basically, you just had enough time to run from one incident to the next. I mean, from an investigative standpoint, it was very hard.

Kara: And those fires were pretty much happening right along that Southern Avenue border. This is Scott Fulkerson, resident agent in charge of the Richmond, ATF field office.

Scott Fulkerson: In this case, that was what exactly happened, where in the spring of 2003, there was a series of fires that occurred in the Prince George's County, District of Columbia borders. Those fires were occurring to occupied single family homes, right along the border.

Because you're only a street... One side of the street might be in the District, the other side of the street might be Prince George's County. That's on the Eastern side of the District of Columbia, because Prince George's County surrounds a large portion of the District.

Kara: I met Scott in his Richmond office. He's a tall guy, and really young for having lead this incredibly complex, sprawling investigation. Even 15 years later, this case was so important to him that even during a busy day, he spent hours talking with me.

Scott Fulkerson: And the way law enforcement typically back then had worked, is when you have different investigative agencies get together periodically in whatever forum that might be.

Kara: One of the things I learned in reporting this story, is that typically fire jurisdictions, even ones that are physically only separated by a road, don't regularly share cases and information. What happens on the DC side of Southern Ave. usually has nothing to do with what happens on the PG County side. But believe it or not, It was a chance encounter between

Captain Hoglander from PG County, and Sergeant Phil Proctor from DC fire that brought these jurisdictions together.

Scott Fulkerson: So, that's where their comparing of notes began. Then once they realized that they may have had a larger problem than what they originally thought, a conversation took place between Captain Hoglander, and our office in Baltimore, because the Baltimore field division of ATF is what had the area of responsibility for Prince George's County. A separate ATF office, in the District of Columbia, had the area of responsibility for the District of Columbia.

Phil Proctor: He just vaguely mentioned, very vaguely, mentioned that they were having a number of fires that were on front porches of single-family homes.

Kara: This is Phil Proctor.

Phil Proctor: And I mentioned to Scott that, "Yeah, we have a few as well." And I think my recollection, I was in the beginning stages of just trying to work through those case files to understand what was going on. The only thing I had, again, was it was front porch fires.

Scott Hoglander: We were having a discussion about fires set on porches or exterior entrances to houses. The feedback from the investigator in DC was, "Hey, I think we've had a couple of those two, let me look at this and I'll get back to you."

Phil Proctor: he said, "Oh, hey. Okay, well bring your case files tomorrow when you come back and we'll look at them." I said, "Okay." Didn't think much of it.

Kara: The next day Proctor Returned to PG county to show Hoglander his case files. Little did he know the importance of what he held in his hands.

Phil Proctor: I go in and I opened the doors. He's in there, but he's in there with a full on group, working group, ATF, other investigators, officials. And I'm kind of taken aback like, "Oh, wait a minute." And I'm like, "Scott, I thought we were just going to come." He said, "Yeah, I know. But I had to let everyone know."

Kara: It's at this point that Proctor realizes the similarities in their cases are a much bigger deal. There is a pattern. Single family homes being lit in the middle of the night with an incendiary device, usually at an egress...like a porch or doorway.

Phil Proctor: I laid out the files, looked at their files. Quickly understood, wait a minute. But even that everybody was still attempting to understand what was truly going on.

Scott Hoglander: As we started to look at this problem and the potential that it could be a lot bigger than we originally thought, I needed help. Unfortunately, I was new and my experience with the ATF was not really there. In fact, I think I only dealt with them maybe twice before this.

I was new to the fire investigations office, like real new. I just graduated the police academy, not even a couple months before all of this started.

From a management standpoint and even an investigator standpoint, I was brand new. I mean, couldn't be any newer.

We asked for help. I mean, it's that simple. There's no way either one of the departments at the time with the current staffing levels could have worked this case, either by themselves or even together without help from an agency such as ATF.

Kara: Scott Fulkerson from ATF

Scott Fulkerson: So, that's when the conversations ensued between the Baltimore ATF office, and the Prince George's County Fire Investigations Unit, and said, can we get together and maybe review some of these case files and see if there's any similarities or any evidence that may be

potentially linking these fires together, other than the fact that they're occupied single family homes, other than geography, and other than the fact that all these fires that they were looking at early on, occurred between the hours of, of midnight and 4:00 AM. So a window, which is a concern, a large concern, because that tends to be the time where folks are in their homes, sleeping and at their most vulnerable.

Obviously, the fact that there are single family occupied homes was for a reason, because somebody and we knew that, and that was a large concern for everybody involved is that if somebody hadn't already gotten hurt, that a great potential or a high potential for somebody to be injured as a result of these fire settings.

<<Ride along montage>>

<<Kara>> That little yellow house

Tom Daley: That's it

<<Kara>> So the house is very close to here. Just down that road.

Tom Daley: Oh yah, I'll take you to it.

We're on the extreme North East end of the city. We're as far East as you can go. $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile from here, you'll cross into Prince George's County.

And New York Avenue.....

<<Kara?>> up here on the corner?

Tom Daley: Yah that's 83rd street he set that house on fire.

But, all we knew at the time; occupied single family structure, middle of the night. That's what our guy does. But it's amazing how you buy into that.

That anything else is not part of our case.

Kara: There were enough similarities between the fires to realize this was a serial offender terrorizing DC and PG County. Attacking homes while families slept, one after the other. I picture those crime scene TV shows with the big walls of photos connected with red string. But at this point, they just have the pictures, with no apparent thread connecting the scenes. This was bigger than a single jurisdiction could investigate by themselves. So an

official task force was assembled to find and catch the firesetter. It would be based in PG County and run by the ATF Baltimore field office. Eventually it involved 15 different agencies across the DMV.

Tom Daley was brought into the task force early on.

Tom Daley:

They quickly called me. I called Scott and we had... Initially an informal task force with guys that we've worked together on so many cases. And then as the cases grew and the media got involved and it was... Became a much more formalized taskforce with members of all the area fire departments and police departments, fire chiefs and police chiefs, and the command staff of ATF standing up a formal federal task force, that was initially housed in PG County at the Bureau of fire investigation. So, that's how it all started.

(PSA BREAK)

Kara: The second half of 2003 saw dozens of fires from this unknown fire setter. And what the newly assembled task force didn't know, was how utterly complex and bizarre this case would become. How solving this case would become a 24/7 job that would take over their lives.

What they did know was that homes were being targeted in the middle of the night. The choices appeared to be random, and without obvious motive. The one commonality was that the homes were all mostly in African American populated communities.

And those communities were on edge. Who could be lighting these fires? How was the firesetter picking targets? Why was that person doing this? Was it just one person? And where would they strike next.

Ms. Ida Collins-McCoy's house was burned on November 11, 2003. She loved her home because it was on a big corner lot that backed up to the national arboretum. A sprawling 446 acres of botanical beauty nestled into NE DC.

Ida Collins- McCoy:

Luckily my husband was home because I was tired and I was sleeping. He happened to come upstairs from the basement and he woke me up to tell me to get up that the house was on fire. And I was thinking that he went in the kitchen and left something on the stove. But he said, "No, it's outside". And immediately I knew something was related to the arsonist.

Kara: Typical to the arsonist, the fire was set in the early morning hours.

Ida Collins- McCoy:

Must've been around 2:30 or so in the morning.

When I finally got myself together, I could see the blaze because my living room was near my front bedroom.

And I saw the blaze and of course he was trying to put it out and I called 911 to report that my house had been set on fire.

<<Kara>>:

Wow. And so the fire I'm assuming was set by the front door. Did you have a front porch?

Ida Collins- McCoy:

Yeah, just a little small porch. Yes.

<<Kara>>

And that's where he had put the devices right by the door.

Ida Collins- McCoy:

Yes.

Kara: But then ATF had to figure out if this fire was one of those set by a serial arsonist or if it was just a one off.

Ida Collins- McCoy:

And some of the questions was really uncomfortable, asking if maybe somebody had something against us, which I always wondered why and who would do something like that.

Kara: The “why” and the “who” was something the task force could not answer in the Fall of 2003. Despite hundreds of tips and leads, they were still reaching for more details about the firesetter. Who could do these horrific acts and go unseen?

A typical firesetter is a young white male....who may be out for revenge; like for a lost job. Sometimes firesetting is done for financial gain, like an insurance pay out on a car. A serial arsonist is someone who habitually lights destructive fires, three or more, and has a cooling off period in between. None of this seemed to fit the profile of the DC firesetter.

Ron Tunkel is a retired arson profiler whose career started with ATF. He stays really busy these days, and is getting ready for a move. But we found time to connect on the phone.

Ron Tunkel: Standard CSI investigators and forensic experts, our national response team, which are probably the finest in the world at arson investigations. They look for clues at crime scenes of physical evidence, pour patterns, points of origin, the collecting accelerants. If it's a homicide and involves a shooting, they're going to collect, spent shell casings. They're going to get the bullets from the deceased. They're going to look for DNA, for fingerprint prints. They're going to look at blood spatter patterns, all of that hard physical evidence necessary. What we as profilers tend to look for are the emotional clues, behavioral clues left behind at a crime scene.

Kara: According to ATF: A profiler assists in the identification, arrest and prosecution of offenders by analyzing the behavior of suspects. Tunkel had been with ATF since 1987.

Ron's years of experience as a profiler at Quantico made him the right person to help the task force figure out the Who and the Why behind this mysterious firer setter. Late Spring 2003 he got call from one of his mentors in the profiling field:

Ron Tunkel: He said, "Hey, Ron, there's something interesting up here in DC and we identified what we think is a serial arsonist and I'd like you to come up and go with me to a meeting." I said, "Sure. Yeah."

And so there were a lot of meetings in the beginning and looking at my notes, which I'm copies of my notes, we're allowed to keep our training materia;.... I think was like in late June. They had come up with this concept of this series in April, but I think I met up with them in either May or June. And then in July, I just started writing a profile based on my observations and thoughts.

Kara: It was Ron's job to give an educated assessment of the fire setter.

Ron Tunkel: Allright what's the gender? who is this? Is it a woman or is it a male?

Kara: Everyone had their own idea of who the fire setter could be. Tom Daley.

Tom Daley: I didn't know. I thought he was just some goofy guy in the neighborhood and that we would catch him in a couple of weeks sitting down there, off of Southern Avenue with the normal band of guys that work all these cases and maybe community member or a narcotics detective or some guy in a law enforcement or fire community would point us in the right direction. And at one in a month, we'll catch him. It couldn't have been more wrong.

But as far as the type of person, we knew the profile would be white male and maybe late '20s, middle-aged something like that angry or some type of mental problem or something that was generally speaking the thought

process. But in truth, in fact though, again, you're developing a hypothesis based on the data collected. It's data collection, identification of problem, collection of data, developmental hypothesis.

Kara: So Ron Tunkel, the profiler from Quantico, helped the team develop their hypothesis based on the facts of THIS case.

Ron Tunkel: Let's narrow the field by 50%. And at the time based on research, most serial arsonists are male. I know it's close to 90% in our studies are male. Now, mind you, there are females. And I teach and show interviews with several females, but I thought it was a male. And part of the thing that tipped me into that, this guy is operating late at night in neighborhoods. Some of the neighborhoods, maybe a woman would not feel so comfortable walking around late at night.

The next thing.... was race.

Kara: And Ron who is white had an atypical opinion about the potential race of the firesetter.

Ron Tunkel: And so I said, based on the victimology and the fact that he had blended into that area. I said he was African-American and there's nothing ... Somebody said, "Oh, you're a racist." I'm remembering some sociology professor called my headquarters and said, "Oh, that guy's wrong. Majority of serial arsonists are white." And that's when I just retorted. "Yeah, because the majority of the American population is white." So again, that had us looking at at a race.

I opined that he was African American. Now, everybody was, "Well, the majority of serial arsonist are white." So what we need to look for is one, the area of offending and two the victimology. Now, we can never forget. And I'll repeat this several times: Violent crime tends to be intraracial in nature. The majority of these victims were African-American in the African-American community. And then another thing we talk about an arsonist working in an area of comfort zone. And this offender had operated there, for a long time without being noticed. He blended in, he fit in. And I went

there one night, deep in the middle of the night with some detectives, and I stood out, and I was noticed. You know?

Kara: Tom Daley had to admit, that assumptions were challenged.

Tom Daley: We knew that all of the reported fires we had as far as June 2003, were all in African American communities. And so we surmise that for a guy not to stand out in the middle of the night, there was a good chance, that it may not be a white guy that could be a black guy. But we didn't know. When we went through that scenario all the time, we just don't know. And you have to admit that, you have to admit that you don't know because whether you want to admit it or not, you don't know. You only know what you know when you get the evidence for it, the rest of it is just assumptions.

Kara: So Ron Tunkel was able to help narrow down the identity of the “who” ... the “why” would remain a mystery until the very end. Theresa Gannon is Professor of Forensic Psychology at the University of Kent in the UK.

Theresa Gannon:

I've come across people who've set fires, the traditional reason is they're really interested and fascinated with fire, they're really angry with someone, they're trying to get them back, they are trying to cry for help or trying to draw attention to their own need in some way.

I've dealt with people who have set fire to their own front doors, because it was an easier way to gain access to their house, people who've set fire to cars to cover up evidence, people who've set fire to other people to get rid of them, gain revenge, or to dispose of a deceased person that they've been involved with killing.

To cover up a burglary, to gain recognition in society and to come along and be the savior. There are many, many, so many different reasons. I probably can't even list them all, but that's why I find it so fascinating.

<<Kara:>>

So what is the difference between, so you listed all those motivations and we all have experienced in our lives anger or resentment or fear or needing a sense of power. What is different about people who actually go that one step further and become fire setters? Is there something different with them psychologically that... For me would know that's not the right thing to do, but why are some of these people able to make that leap and be destructive?

Theresa Gannon: Well, that's a really interesting question, and that was a question myself and colleagues asked ourselves, gosh, nearly a decade ago now, I mean, 2012, when I was essentially a clinician working with these people. And I realized that actually there was no theory to explain why someone would use fire as opposed to just stab someone or do something else, for example, if they get angry or fed up with their neighbor or whatever it is.

Kara: Theresa and her colleagues developed a theory called the Multi Trajectory Theory of Adult Firesetting. Basically it says that as children, most of us learn the right ways to use fire.

Theresa Gannon: So we may have developed an appropriate fire script, which is that you use fire to make a room look nicer, or you burn candles on a shelf because it brings about a feel of warmth and coziness. But we argued that some people, from their developmental experiences, develop an inappropriate fire script. So for example, somehow, either by accident, incidentally, or on more purposefully, they learned that fire is a really good way to cope with all manner of things that happened to them.

Kara: For example, Theresa says think of a neglected child who accidentally sets the carpet in their bedroom on fire....

Theresa Gannon:

...they learn that very quickly, mom and dad come running, and there's lots of attention given to them. So you can see that for a child who perhaps has poor communication skills or other problems, that that can very quickly become a kind of powerful tool that they use throughout their life.

Kara: So, at this point, the "Why" or the motive of the DC firesetter is unclear and potentially complicated. With so many different possible motives

The path to the answer is unpredictable....and at this point in 2003, with dozens of fires being set, no one has any idea how long it's going to take to figure out who IS the elusive firesetter.

<<Kara>> On September 13, 2003....only a few months after Hoglander and Proctor realized there was something really big, and horrible happening in DC and Prince George's County...a possible break. According to files obtained through ATF, around 3am, three boys returned to their home on Anacostia Avenue. They had been working at a place called The Mad Chef on Central Avenue. They pulled up to their house and there's a strange man sitting on their stoop.

Months of following up on leads, combing through hours of video surveillance...

The paths to a potential suspect seemed so far away, but at this moment, for the first time, an answer to who this firesetter could be seemed closer.
Tom Daley.

Tom Daley: So, When I pulled up, Scott was already here and I said, "We have to pull all the strings on this. We've got a sighting, we've got three eye witnesses, we have physical evidence." This was our biggest break ever in the case.

Kara: Next time on Arson...

Tom Daley: They found a trash bag with a fully loaded device in it. And they took the device and walked across here to the sewer and threw it in the sewer.

Kara: For the first time....the investigators had eyewitnesses and an actual intact unburned incendiary device. But it would be almost two years before they learned WHO had left it.

Credits

Arson is brought to you by the international association of arson investigators in cooperation with the bureau of alcohol tobacco firearms and explosives. Our executive producer is Scott Stephens, our editor is Tracy Wahl. arson is produced by platform media with help from Emily Vaughn, and Mariah Dennis. Engineering support from Andrew Chadwick. Our theme music is by the last knife fighter
And I'm Kara McGuirk-Allison.

For more information: www.firearson.com
www.atf.org

